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# Comanche

National Grassland

## Santa Fe Trail National Historic Trail Routes



U.S.D.A., NAL

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CATALOGING PREP



## Santa Fe Trail National Historic Trail Routes

Extending 1,200 miles across five states, the Santa Fe National Historic Trail was the first major western trade route. Linking Franklin, Missouri, with Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Santa Fe Trail aided in the development of one-quarter of the North American continent. Anglo-American, American Indian, and Hispanic cultures came into contact on the Trail, creating a mosaic of multi-ethnic communities along its length.

Wagon ruts, tangible reminders of the hardships faced by early settlers and traders, are still visible on the Comanche and Cimarron National Grasslands. Between 1821 and 1880, thousands of wagon trains traversed the Trail, bringing textiles and manufactured goods from Missouri, and returning with silver coins, pelts, and mules from Santa Fe. Caravans averaged about 15 miles a day—nine to ten weeks travel time between Santa Fe and Franklin. After the mid-1830's, travelers could choose between the Cimarron Cutoff Route and the Mountain Route. Although 100 miles longer, the Mountain Route featured more water, and was less vulnerable to Indian attacks.

Both cooperation and conflict marked the history of the Santa Fe Trail. Bent's Fort, located along the Mountain Route near the modern town of La Junta, Colorado, typified the complex cooperation among American Indian, Anglo-American and Hispanic traders that developed along with the Trail. In contrast, the Trail carried Major Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West as it advanced on Santa Fe at the beginning of the Mexican-American War in 1846. A major Civil War battle was also fought along the Trail at Glorieta Pass in 1862.

In 1880, the first steam locomotive arrived in Santa Fe, ending the use of the Trail as a major freight corridor. Although the wagons have been gone for more than a century, modern Americans continue to follow the Trail, in search of history.



**1**

## Sierra Vista



For Santa Fe Trail travelers heading southwest, the route along Timpas Creek marked a major milestone in their journey. Leaving the Plains and entering the foothills and mountains, travelers were guided by the distant Spanish Peaks, which came into view along this section of the Trail. A short walk to the top of a low bluff gives you a commanding view of the Southern Rocky Mountains and surrounding prairie, much like that afforded early travelers. A hiking trail follows ruts of the Santa Fe Trail between Sierra Vista Overlook and Timpas Picnic Area. The trail is 3.7 miles in length.

**3**

## Iron Spring



Located along the Mountain Route, Iron Spring served as an important watering hole for livestock. Although the water was heavily mineralized, and "unpalatable," in the words of an 1851 traveler, the Missouri Stage Company built a stage station on this site in 1861. Operated by Henry C. Withers, the Iron Springs stage station was the only stop on the Trail between Bent's Fort and Trinidad until 1866. Today, scattered stones, low mounds of dirt, and juniper posts mark the remains of the station. Well-preserved Trail ruts can be seen immediately north and west of the interpretive site.



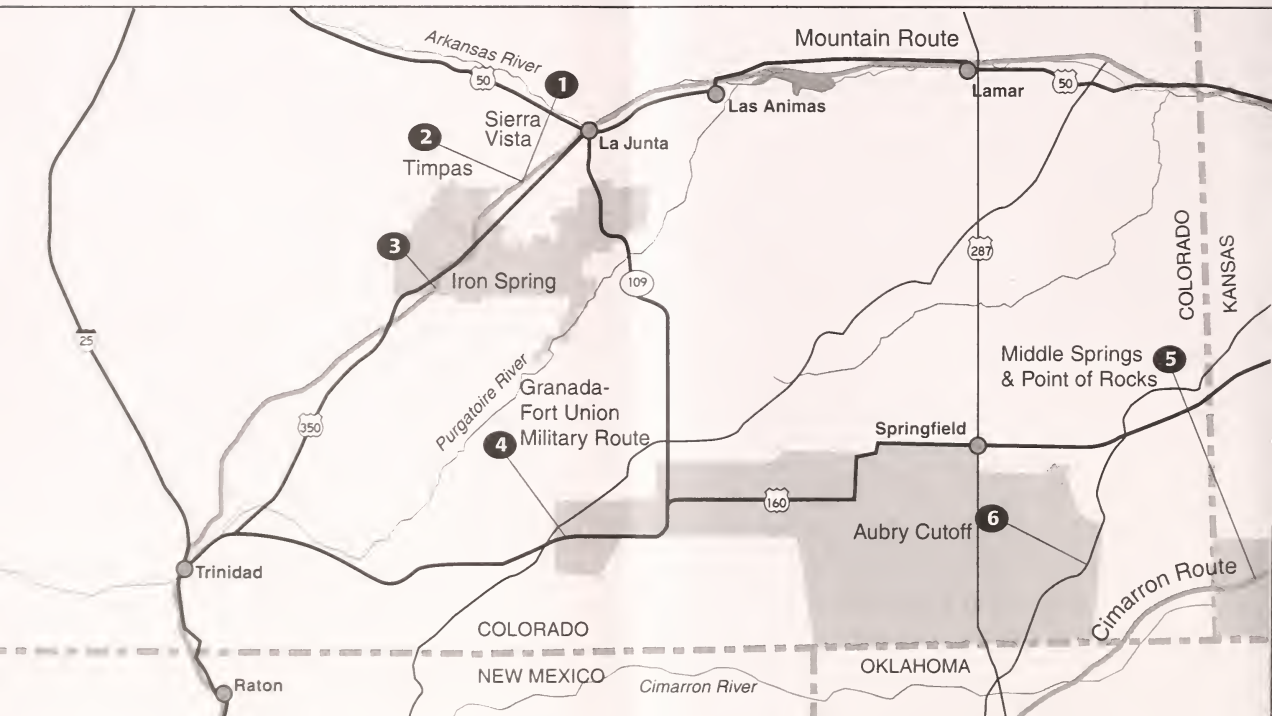


2

Timpas



After fording the Arkansas River near Bent's Fort, Santa Fe Trail travelers would camp near the modern town of La Junta, Colorado. Striking southwest, wagon trains were faced with 16 long, dry miles before they reached water at Timpas. Conveniently situated along the permanent though brackish creek, Timpas soon became an important stop along the Trail. In 1869, Basil "Uncle Bill" Metcalf established a ranch there, providing services for travelers, including lodging, a store, bar and livery stable. When the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad reached Timpas in 1876 it was used as a shipping point for the thousands of cattle produced by area ranches. After the close of the Santa Fe Trail, homesteaders were lured to Timpas by the promise of an irrigation project. When the dam was destroyed by floodwaters in 1922 most homesteaders abandoned the region.



4

#### Granada-Fort Union Military Route

Writing from Fort Lyon, Colorado on June 8, 1870, Major Richard I. Dodge reported on his recent survey of "a new wagon route" connecting Fort Lyon to Fort Union in New Mexico. Although used sporadically since the early 1850's, traffic along the Military Route increased dramatically in 1873 when the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad reached Granada, Colorado. The Granada-Fort Union Route was used to transport freight, primarily military consignments, between the railhead and Fort Union. However, by 1876 the railhead had moved west to the vicinity of Trinidad and traffic along the Military Route decreased dramatically. Trail ruts along the Granada-Fort Union road are still visible, and are marked by limestone posts.





## **5 Middle Spring and Point of Rocks**



Travelers along the Santa Fe Trail faced 36 miles of waterless prairie between Lower or Wagonbed Spring near the modern town of Ulysses, Kansas, and Middle Spring, a dependable water source. Described by a Trail survey team in 1825 as a "brisk, running branch" of the often-dry Cimarron River, Middle Spring must have been a welcome sight to both travelers and livestock. About one mile to the west, Point of Rocks was used as a navigational aid in locating Middle Spring. Later, Point of Rocks was the site of one of the area's first major livestock operations. Short interpretive trails are available at both Middle Spring and Point of Rocks. Deep, well-preserved Trail ruts can also be seen in the vicinity.

## **6 Aubry Cutoff**

In the early 1850s, Francis X. Aubry, an energetic French Canadian Santa Fe trader, pioneered a new route west of and parallel to the Cimarron Cutoff. Water and grass were more abundant along this new route, and it avoided the deep sand areas found farther south. Although somewhat longer than the Cimarron Cutoff, the Aubry Cutoff became a favorite of freighters, survey parties, military expeditions, and stage lines during the 1850s and 1860s. Trail ruts of the Aubry Cutoff are still visible, and are marked by limestone posts.

**For additional information, please contact:**

Comanche National Grassland

1420 East 3rd Street

La Junta, CO 81050 (719) 384-2181

or

27204 Hwy 287

Springfield, CO 81073 (719) 523-6591

Cimarron National Grassland

242 Hwy 56 East

Elkhart, KS 67950 (620) 697-4621



Trail ruts, historic artifacts, and rubble from homesteads and stage stations provide evidence that thousands of travelers crossed this land more than a century ago. Each holds a clue that archaeologists use to reconstruct what life on the Santa Fe Trail was like. These cultural resources are fragile and irreplaceable. If destroyed or removed, the information they reveal is lost forever. And so is a legacy that belongs to us all.

Excavation of buried metal artifacts with the aid of metal detectors is prohibited. The exact locations of artifacts are an important clue archaeologists use to understand our history. Please do not drive over or along Trail ruts. These features are fragile, and are easily damaged by vehicle traffic.

All cultural resources on public lands are protected by law. The Antiquities Act and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act impose fines and penalties for disturbing or removing artifacts or damaging cultural features. Please help protect our past. Report any acts of vandalism to the Comanche National Grassland office in La Junta: (719) 384-2181 or in Springfield: (719) 523-6591; or the Cimarron National Grassland office in Elkhart: (620) 697-4621.

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